

New Haven Public Schools

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE ON H.B. No. 5033, AN ACT REQUIRING THE INSTALLATION AND USE OF SEAT SAFETY BELTS ON SCHOOL BUSES.

Senator DeFronzo, Representative Guerrero and members of the Transportation Committee, my name is Dr. Reginald Mayo and I am the Superintendent of the New Haven Public Schools. Thank you for this opportunity to submit this testimony to you on House Bill 5033, An Act Requiring the Installation and Use of Seat Safety Belts on School Buses.

I am testifying today to ask you to reject this bill. I want to start by acknowledging that we all have a heightened awareness to the issue of seat belts given the recent tragedy in Rocky Hill. The accident was a tragedy, but this bill is not the solution. As outlined below, the issue is complex and perhaps counterintuitive. The bottom line is that school buses are the safest way for children to travel to and from school. Of the 25 million children who ride school buses each weekday in America, we experience an average of five passenger fatalities each year. While we want to do what we can to decrease this number, we need to be mindful of what measures we know will work. We have no information to show that seat belts on school buses will improve this record, and in fact many believe adding seat belts to school buses may increase the number of fatalities. There are a lot of unknowns. What we do know is that passage of HB 5033 would lead to serious financial and practical difficulties for school districts around the state and will be detrimental to our students.

As I mentioned above, we know that school buses are already the safest way for students to travel to and from school. Each weekday in America 480,000 yellow school buses carry 25 million children to and from school. According to the National Academy of Sciences, an average of 820 school children are killed annually during school transportation hours, however only 2% of them are school bus passengers. Of those 2%, three-quarters of the fatalities occurred while boarding or departing the bus. Given these statistics, the recent death of Vikas Parikh, while tragic, appears to be a unique situation and not a reflection of the current level of student safety on school buses.

New Haven's buses use the compartmentalization system, a system of high-backed, cushioned flexible seats that are placed closely together to absorb impacts. This system has a proven safety record and also allows for more students to be transported on a single bus. The 3-point seat belts take up substantially more room on the bus, and decrease the number of students that can be transported. In our district, the 3-point seat belt system would reduce seating capacity on each bus from 71 passengers to 47 passengers. To accommodate our students, the District would have to add 52 more buses to transport school children.

If this bill passes, New Haven would have to retrofit 150 buses from our current fleet with new 3-point seat belt units. To retrofit our current fleet by January 1st, 2011, it would cost the District an estimated \$2.5 million dollars. We would also have to add 52 more buses at a cost of \$2.8 million dollars for a total of \$5.3 million dollars for the first year alone.

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In addition to generating many new costs for our District, the proposed bill also raises several logistical questions on how the seat belt usage will be monitored and enforced. Who will be responsible for ensuring that children are buckled in properly? Will the driver have to assist younger children with the belts at each stop? What happens if child vandalizes or accidentally breaks a belt – does the bus become inoperable? Will another bus have to be called in to transport the children mid-route? Who will make sure the students do not unbuckle themselves during transit? It is evident that should this bill pass, the district would have to hire aides to ride the buses to monitor and assist children with the seat belts.

To ensure every bus has an aide, we would need to hire an additional 214 aides for our existing buses, and an additional 52 aides on the additional buses we would have to purchase to make up for the loss of seat space on our existing fleet. Hiring these aides will cost the District an additional \$12,103 dollars a day and increase the already compounding annual cost by another \$2.1 million dollars.

Finally, I am concerned that this proposed legislation may actually decrease student safety. A 2002 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) study found that a 3-point belt, if not used properly, could increase the risk of injury. I have other concerns as well. Young children will need assistance not only buckling the belt, but also unbuckling. If children need assistance it could cause a substantial delay in evacuating the vehicle in an emergency situation. The District could potentially be liable for lawsuits associated with misuse of the belts and proper evacuation.

New Haven's children cannot afford this unfunded mandate which will cost our district at least \$7.4 million dollars in the next year. While cost alone should not outweigh concern for the safety of our students, it must be considered when looking at a proposal which does not guarantee increased student safety, and which may in fact place our children in greater peril.

It goes without saying that student safety is a top priority for New Haven and all other school districts. However, we do not know whether mandating the installation of lap/shoulder or 3-point seat belts on every school bus in the state will make our students safer. What we do know for sure is that such a mandate will divert millions of dollars away from our other top priority – educating our students.

Therefore, I respectfully ask the committee to oppose HB 5033. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.